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## ***Comadre Work: Grassroots Feminism in a Kaqchikel Maya Town***

By Joyce Bennett<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This essay analyzes indigenous women's collective action that improves indigenous women's lives and increases their agency in a Kaqchikel Maya town. The women whose work I consider come together under the structures of a patriarchal organization, the Principe de Paz evangelical church. I extend Patricia Hill Collins' concept of motherwork and Nancy Naples' concept of activist mothering to what I call *comadre* work, or care work that women enact for each other through creative kin networks. Women practice *comadre* work as they pool physical and financial resources, teach each other to read and write in Spanish, and speak for themselves in public spaces, resulting in women's increased ability to advocate for themselves and their families in various non-religious domains of life. While they do not self-identify as feminists, my analysis of their actions highlights how their *comadre* work is feminist because it supports and improves women's well-being. This work is based on 20 months of non-continuous research between 2009 and 2016 with the 13 women in the group from the Principe de Paz Evangelical church in Santa Catarina Palopó, Sololá, Guatemala. I rely on participant-observation and interviews with women, all of which I conducted in Kaqchikel Maya. I conclude that Kaqchikel women use a homosocial space within a patriarchal institution to further women's agendas. Recognizing indigenous women's gender-based activism is critical to being more inclusive of indigenous women in the feminist movement and scholarship.

*Keywords:* *comadre* work, indigenous, women

### **Introduction**

“Wakamin kan jeb'ël nuk'aslem” [Now my life is good]<sup>2</sup> – María<sup>3</sup> (personal communication, July 3, 2015)

María is a 45-year-old indigenous Kaqchikel<sup>4</sup> woman in Santa Catarina Palopó, Sololá, Guatemala. Indigenous women in Guatemala are structurally marginalized through multiple axes

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Kaqchikel to English are the author's.

<sup>3</sup> María is a pseudonym to protect her identity, as are all women's names in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Kaqchikel is the modern spelling adopted with the Guatemalan congressional approbation of the current alphabet (1987). The most common alternative spelling is Cakchiquel, based in a system developed without the input of native speakers and linguists that adapts the Spanish alphabet to the Kaqchikel language (Brown, Maxwell, and Little, 2006, p. 8-9). I use Kaqchikel to respect the hard work of Kaqchikel-identified linguists to assert ownership over their own language.

(ethnicity, class, gender). Yet I agree with María; her life is good now. Over the past ten years, she became a leader in her community, increased her self-confidence, improved her literacy, developed a network of women who assist each other, and increased earnings from the herbal medicines she sells. She supports other women and has a reliable network. Her life *is* better.

These improvements took place in a context of constant struggle. María described indigenous women's lives in her town:

K'ayew la' porque jun ixöq majun ta más nikowin nisamajij wawa'. Xaxe k'a re niqab'än, achiel niqab'ij cha re jun qacentavo. Man kan ta jani' niqatzu' ruwäch. Jun ken nuk'waj 15 días chi qawäch si es que xqab'än k'a. ...Cuesta jub'a porque xa ken, xa mes, xa k'ulinik pa jay niqab'än. (personal communication, July 3, 2015).

[It is difficult because a woman cannot work much here. We just do this; we call it getting a few pennies. We do not see a lot from [our labor]. A weaving takes 15 days for us if you do it fast.... It is difficult because just weaving, just cleaning, just keeping house is what we do.]

María described women's growing confrontation with global neoliberal capitalism, meaning government-shrinking economic reform that leaves the poor more vulnerable to market fluctuations, increasingly dependent on the cash economy, and ultimately poorer (Benson, Fischer, & Thomas, 2008). These reforms come as just the latest in a long line of economic changes that destabilized the region for much of the twentieth century (Handy, 1994; Smith, 1990). Indigenous women like María find it difficult to survive given their limited education and frequent encounters with ethnic- and gender-based discrimination. These factors create an onerous environment in which indigenous women must live, work, and raise families.

María's life improved because of her participation Santa Catarina's evangelical Principe de Paz church women's group. I argue that the group engages in collective feminist action to improve their lives, despite their lack of identification with the term. Feminist work is that which aims to provide health, well-being, and integrity for people, including indigenous women (Mohanty, 2003: 4). When I asked the 13 group members if they considered themselves feminists (riyat at jun feminista?), they responded "ninb'än participar pa ri grupo feminil" [I participate in the women's group]. The women did not recognize the historical and political associations of the term "feminism,"<sup>5</sup> which is not surprising given the fractured nature of the feminist movement in Guatemala.

The Guatemalan women's movement seeks to amplify women's rights but operates mostly in urban areas without indigenous women (Álvarez et al, 2002; Berger, 2006; Vrana, 2017). The movement grew in universities; urban women's groups formed during the civil war (1960-1996) often did not include indigenous women (Berger, 2006). Guatemalan indigenous feminist scholars critiqued the urban feminist movement for its failure to include their issues. Cumez argued that the role of Maya women was distinct from issues that *ladina*-identified (non-indigenous) women face, saying Maya women's roles hindered indigenous women's participation in the Guatemalan feminist movement (Cumez & Monón, 2006). Alma Lopez, a Maya K'iche' woman from

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<sup>5</sup> Indigenous women might prefer to stay away from categorizing their work as feminist for a variety of reasons, including the association of feminism with the left, and political ramifications for being leftist in a country with a recent history of killing leftist individuals.

Guatemala, argued that "The feminist movement that comes from academia is scarcely related to us" (Duarte Bastian, 2002, p.178). An explicitly Guatemalan indigenous feminism arose with a handful of writers that focused on how to move indigenous activism from individual to collective; issues of multiculturalism in the feminist movement; and the nature of gender relations in indigenous communities (Álvarez, 2006; Cumez & Monzón, 2006; Hernández Castillo, 2010; Macleod & Cabrera Perez-Arminan, 2000; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2003).

In addition to academic feminism, there are other kinds of indigenous feminist organizing in Guatemala, including Kaqla and the Political Association of Mayan Women (Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas, or Kinojib'al Maib' Ixoqib') (Duarte Bastian, 2012). Indigenous women also organized around the impacts of the civil war, especially via widows' organizations including but not limited to CONAVIGUA (Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala) and around surviving the ethnically motivated sexual violence of the civil war (Crosby & Brinton Lykes, 2011; Green, 1999). While the body of indigenous feminist work in Guatemala grows, María and the women in the church group did not identify with it.

The feminist work María and her colleagues do is often unrecognized: grassroots indigenous women's work within the Evangelical church. In analyzing their work, I answer transnational feminist scholars' calls to study feminist work in patriarchal and/or spiritual spaces (Alexander, 2005: 15; Dillard, 2012: 78-79; Mohanty, 2003: 18). I extend Patricia Hill Collins' concept of motherwork (1998) and Nancy Naples' framework of activist mothering (1992) to what I call *comadre* work. Activist mothering "comprises all actions, including social activism, that addressed the needs of their children and community" (Naples, 1992, p.448). *Comadre* work describes how women deploy creative kinship to create an economy of care. *Comadres* are godmothers, women who are not blood relatives but who are adopted into the family through this creative kinship term. *Comadres* support their godchildren in many circumstances, emotionally, socially, and financially. The relationship is widely used in Santa Catarina and within the evangelical church, despite its Catholic origins. Using this term to understand women's collective work collapses the false boundaries between public and private work in indigenous women's lives and instead considers their transformative power holistically. Women enact their comadre work not through non-profits, who have catered to women's needs in the post-peace accords era, but instead through the homosocial space of the women's group within the patriarchal evangelical church. The evangelical church subjugates women to men's agendas without women's leadership or input (Chong, 2008). The women in this article do grassroots feminist work but stop short of challenging the patriarchal nature of the church, a tension discussed in the conclusion.

Women's *comadre* work involves collectively supporting each other through *visitas* or visits to one another's homes, teaching each other how to read and write in Spanish, encouraging each other in public speaking, and providing networking and strategies for managing the informal market. Indigenous women in Guatemala have historically been disenfranchised, illiterate for lack of educational opportunities at the federal level, silenced in public settings, and excluded from the formal economy (Crosby & Brinton Lykes, 2011; Cumez & Monón, 2006; Green, 1999). Breaking through those barriers results in women's increased self-confidence rather than with the submissive behavior generally expected of indigenous women. With their increased self-confidence, women are better able to provide and care for themselves and their children.

## Latin American Feminism and Evangelism

Santa Catarina Palopó is a town of 5,000 people (Administración 2008-2012, 2011). It lies on the shores of Lake Atitlán and is 5 kilometers from Panajachel, an international tourist destination. Despite Santa Catarina's proximity to Panajachel, Santa Catarina does not receive large numbers of tourists and conserves much of its traditional Maya culture (Little, 2004). There is one road in town near the lake shore; as the population expanded exponentially in the 1970s and 1980s, town residents moved up the side of the volcanic crater into which the town is built. Higher up they found more affordable land, although fewer services like electricity, municipal water, and town-maintained paths. Many of the women in this article live in this area, at least a 15-minute walk from the road. Most settled there when they married but could not afford space lower in town.

Kaqchikel is the lingua franca, although one can hear Spanish closer to the road. Middle-aged women like those in the church group often did not attend much if any school as children because families preferred to invest their resources in boys' education and because the educational system is intentionally derogatory towards indigenous peoples (Edwards, 2002; Hallman, Peracca, Catino, & Ruiz, 2006; Maxwell, 2009). Because of these exclusions, the women in the church group self-identify as monolingual Kaqchikel speakers, although I show how they acquired Spanish and literacy through their *comadre* work.

Indigenous women are expected to care for their children and ensure they have food and shelter; yet women's financial standing constrains their ability to provide such care. Indigenous women are systematically excluded from the formal labor market and earn significantly less than men and *ladinas* (Coordinación y Convergencia Nacional Maya Waqib' Kej, 2015; Edwards, 2002; Ñopo and Gonzales, 2008; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2008).<sup>6</sup> Women rely on informal domestic work, handicraft sales, or their spouses, siblings, and parents' financial support.<sup>7</sup> Reliance on spouses can be especially problematic in light of high rates of alcoholism, domestic violence, and femicide (Musalo & Bookey, 2013; Sanford, 2008).

Aid work through national and international organizations flows into town, but it is unevenly distributed. Aid such as cinderblock stoves or backpacks for children is relegated to those living close to the road. Even aid work targeting women often does not reach the women in this article. For example, the women do not engage with the non-profit dedicated to improving women's lives through family planning. The non-profit mostly reaches younger women and those who live closer to the road because of the social networks of the non-profit's employees and physical ease of access. The non-profit does not address women's pressing economic needs directly. Out of this engagement gap emerged women's activism.

The women in this article organize under the auspices of an evangelical church, which took hold in Santa Catarina in the 1980s and 1990s (Catarino Sajvin-Sajvin<sup>8</sup>, personal communication, July 13, 2015). Evangelism spread in Guatemala during the latter half of the twentieth century, fitting into a spiritual landscape where Catholicism and Maya spirituality were the main religious practices (Annis, 1987; O'Neill, 2009). Evangelism was politicized during the civil war as the Guatemalan state supported conversion from Catholicism to Evangelism, which then-dictator Rios Montt argued would save the nation from violence, "backwardness," and communism (Stoll, 1990:

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<sup>6</sup> Employment in the formal labor market requires attributes and skills difficult for indigenous women to attain such as an education, the ability to speak Spanish, and literacy. Indigenous women like those in this article are often excluded from the formal labor market as a result of their exclusion from state apparatuses like school.

<sup>7</sup> Little noted selling handicrafts in the informal market opened spaces of women's financial empowerment (Little, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Town resident; pastor of Principe de Paz.

180-182). For many years in Santa Catarina, renouncing Catholicism and becoming Evangelical was highly controversial and created tensions in town politics, among neighbors, and within families. Tensions have since calmed but not disappeared (María, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

Scholars critique evangelism, especially its impacts for indigenous women. Research on Evangelism in the 1990s indicated shifting identity politics in the region regarding both religion and ethnicity (Garrard-Burnett, 1998; Stoll, 1990). Since then, Evangelism is often analyzed as a powerful colonizing force (Samson, 2007). Scholars show that Evangelism reinforces capitalism's individualist perspective, eroding the remnants of collectivism so critical to indigenous identity that survived under Catholic practice (Early, 2012). Leading feminist Latin American scholar Virginia Vargas wrote that "fundamentalisms defend a set of immutable ideals about the world that are held up as norms for society, often with horrendous consequences for the bodies and lives of women" (2009, p.151). Yet Pamela Cochran extensively documented the Evangelical feminist movement in the United States beginning in the 1970s (2005); Hardesty traced that movement back to the nineteenth century (1999). Participants believed that when interpreted correctly, the Bible established equal roles for men and women. The Evangelical feminist movement in the US set a precedent for empowering women to access greater social equality via the church's structure. Latin America has a long history of women using their positions in the church for better lives, for independence, and for learning (Brusco, 1995; Paz, 1990). The Principe de Paz women's group carries on this tradition: using space within the church to create better lives for themselves and for their families within a context of few supports.

Today, there are five Evangelical churches in town, each of a different denomination. The Principe de Paz church is the only church with a pastor from town, although others have indigenous pastors from other towns; all the pastors are men. Evangelical church members from different congregations recognize each other as fellow evangelicals, but the five churches compete for members. Membership to interest groups like the women's group attracts members. Evangelism often interests the most socially marginalized residents (Garrard-Burnett, 1998). The Principe de Paz church is located highest up in town; it generally serves the most vulnerable residents compared to the one Catholic and other evangelical churches in town.

The church's stance on gender relations, as the pastor presented them, is that "achi'a, ixoqi', cada jujun k'o rusamäj nub'an" [men and women, each has their own role] (personal communication, July 6, 2015). Globally, women's role is debated within evangelical doctrine, but there is general agreement that women are subordinate to men (Bloesch, 1982; Chong, 2008; Gallagher, 2003). However, the system of complementarity that the pastor presents syncretically incorporates indigenous views of gender roles into evangelical doctrine (Metz & Webb, 2014). Given that many church members do not read well and/or consider the pastor to be the authority in spiritual matters, the pastor's interpretation of gender roles shapes many church members' conceptions of appropriate faith-based gendered behavior. Parishioners enact the pastor's visions of gender complementarity at the local level.

María and a few other women founded the women's group in the Principe de Paz church in 2005 when the then-pastor asked them to attend to women's needs. He left the women to administer and grow the group. The current pastor's leadership is much the same. The women designed the group's current functions of a Friday evening service, a prayer meeting, and visits. The church receives offerings from women's services and prayer meetings, and the women's group attracts new members through their work. As is normal for churches of all denominations and religions in the region, the women's group is in charge of cleaning the church, preparing food for

gatherings, and other domestic work. The women also use the group to gather collective resources without reporting back to the church, as detailed below. The group connects with other evangelical women's groups both in town and in other towns, going on trips with or to them as a means of sharing the word of God and creating fellowship between groups. These visits to other churches are women's only time to travel, especially independently of their children. The women of this study argue and provide evidence to their claim that participation in the church brings them tangible benefits.

## Methodology and Setting

I gathered data through participant-observation and interviews with the 13 women in the Principe de Paz evangelical church group. I conducted 20 months of participant-observation research with the women between 2009 and 2016. In 2015, I gathered semi-structured interviews about women's experiences in the group; women ranged in age from early 30s to early 60s. I conducted all interviews in Kaqchikel Maya, which I speak fluently and is the primary language of all participating women.

I structured participant-observation work around the women's group activities. Regular church services are on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday from 6-8PM. The women's group sponsors Friday evening's service, when the pastor dedicates the sermon to issues in women's lives like raising children and wives' roles. Seating in church is always divided by gender. For Friday service, the women's side fills, while the men's side typically fills to 1/3 capacity. The women's group has a fasting prayer service Friday morning and goes on "visits" each week to women's homes as described below. I attended countless numbers of these activities.

I use an asset-based approach in my research. Hernández Castillo noted the victimizing emphasis of many ethnographies about Mesoamerican indigenous women (2001). Instead of focusing on how the church limits women's lives and autonomy, I focus on how indigenous women use their space in the church to advocate for themselves. This approach is contrary to essentialist narratives about the evangelical church being bad for women and/or indigenous people and takes seriously women's choice to participate in this institution.

In the analysis, I include women's quotes in Kaqchikel and then provide my English translation. I use the women's words as part of feminist practice itself: I foreground marginalized women's voices to respect the information they shared and recognize that their voices have the potential to "transform feminism and... thread together different genealogies of struggle" (Duarte Bastian, 2012, p.154). I provide the original Kaqchikel quotes first to privilege their words in academic writing and contribute to the growing number of scholars researching and publishing in and about Kaqchikel. Most importantly, I include women's original quotes so they can see their own words valued and published.<sup>9</sup>

## Comadre Work

### *Public Speaking, Literacy, and Self-Confidence*

Some of women's most important *comadre* work was to teach each other literacy, basic Spanish, and public speaking. The women in this church group self-identified as monolingual Kaqchikel speakers, although many of them now read Spanish Bible verses. The women remain

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<sup>9</sup> The women are uncomfortable reading in Kaqchikel. While preparing this work, I read their quotes aloud to them as they sounded out the words.

uncomfortable speaking in Spanish; none of them speak Spanish to me. Most of the women did not read and write in any language before getting involved in the women's group because literacy in Kaqchikel is uncommon. Women learned to read in Spanish by sounding out Bible verses that they were to read in front of the congregation. The Principe de Paz church only uses Spanish-language Bibles. While Bibles in Kaqchikel exist, the church uses Spanish-language Bibles because they are available in stores nearby and not many people read Kaqchikel. When women were assigned to read a passage in church, they had to do so in Spanish. To learn, women who could already read helped women sound out words letter by letter. Once a woman could read, she would then learn to write. Again, careful help from other women in the group encouraged women to practice writing letters. Women self-identified as successful once they made lists of names and chores for the group. I saw this method in practice for two women in the group; the process took from several months to over two years. Gaining these skills helped women communicate with their children's school and government offices more effectively as they use Spanish for official purposes.

Prior to the women's membership in the group, none of them did public speaking, but doing it regularly in church increased their self-confidence. Church membership requires that people go before the entire congregation to lead prayer, read a Bible passage, or sing. While most women expressed difficulties overcoming the nerves they faced, the first few times they stood in front of the congregation, they found support from other women. Such supports included practicing the speaking portion before service as women learned to sound out the words, using other women as "plants" in the audience to provide positive feedback while speaking, and sharing through storytelling the nervousness of public speaking. As women gained experience, they reported more comfort with engaging intimidating, non-church entities like their children's teachers or the municipal government. Such changes go against ethnic gender norms in Guatemala that expect indigenous women to be submissive. Women's increased confidence meant better education for their children and following up on child payments from ex-husbands, small but important changes for women fighting for survival.

María made important strides in her life because of the collective work of the women's group. She is the leader of the women's group at 49-years old with two children, ages 25 and 10. She left her abusive ex-husband years ago and later had her second child with another abusive partner, whom she also left. As a child, María went to school for one year, where she tried to learn reading and writing. When she did not pass, her parents removed her from school. María joined the church 15 years ago when her parents joined. When María co-founded the women's group, she was a monolingual Kaqchikel-speaking woman who never communicated in Spanish.

María learned to speak publicly in Spanish through speaking at church services. She said:

Majun b'ey xitzijon chi kiwäch ri winaqi' achiel chi ri. Yalan xinxib'ij wi'. Toq xijote' nab'eyal, xintz'apij nuwäch. Pero xinb'än, xinb'ij xkiruto' Dios, ja re xinb'än. Ya ri kayak más xikowin, ke re, ke re xinb'än. (personal communication, May 25, 2013).

[I never spoke in front of so many people before. I was terrified. When I got up there the first time, I had to close my eyes. But I did, and I said God will help me, and I did it. Then the next time was easier, the next was easier].



For María, speaking in front of the congregation was a difficult process but one that made her feel more confident.

María's self-confidence enabled her success in other areas of life. In María's family, adult brothers make decisions about her parents, the maintenance and development of the family compound, and any individuals in the family who may need support or intervention. In decision-making conversations, brothers typically speak while sisters listen. María now speaks during such decision-making processes, thus making space for women's voices and concerns. This occasionally causes arguments, especially when María is a dissenting voice, yet she remains present and continues to participate. Additionally, María manages her own small business as a midwife and herbal medicinalist, which grew as she worked her way through leadership positions in the women's group. "Es que riyin xinb'ij, wi yikowin ninb'än jujun taq cosas ke re, achike ruma man yikowin ta ninb'än jub'a nunegocio?" [I said, if I can do things like that (at church), why can I not do a business?] (personal communication, April 11, 2017).

María also communicates with her children's teachers. Before her work in the group, she gave letters the school sent home to her brother to handle, and she asked him to go to parent-teacher meetings. But now María reads the letters and goes to the parent-teacher meetings herself. She said "Wakamin weteman chi yikowin ninb'än. Riye' majun ta yekowin nikib'ij pe chiwe ruma riyin ntajin ninb'än üt. Man ninxib'ij ta chik wi' chi kiwäch ke la pa escuela" [Now I know I can do it. They cannot say anything to me because I am doing good things. I am not scared in front of them at school anymore] (personal communication, July 5, 2016). María no longer fears chastisement from racist officials who refuse to speak her language; the result is a better education for her children.

Juana, a 53-year old woman with four children and an alcoholic spouse, also discussed how skills she gained through the women's group helped her. She became involved in the group at its inception. As a child, she went to school for two years; her grades were poor, her teachers punished her physically, and her parents removed her from school. Of her participation in the women's group, she said "yalan jab'al nina' ninb'än participar porque nawetemaj jub'a k'a ri'. Nawetemaj na jub'a. Achiel riyin xinweteman jub'a ri ninb'än leer" [I feel very good when I participate because I learn some things. You learn some. Like me, I learned to read a bit] (personal communication, July 1, 2016). She continued, saying "Majun kan ta achiel riyin man yikowin ta ninb'än leer. Majun ta yikowin. Pero ri' nib'i'ix chiwe nab'än, yakowin naya' eqal. Entonces Dios k'a ri' yiruto'. Nib'i'ix chiwe tab'ana' wakamin. Pero ri re xinb'än lo que xikowin" [I could not really read. I could not. But they told me I could do it, you can do it slowly. So God helped me. They told me to do it now. But I did what I could] (personal communication, July 1, 2016). It was with the help and encouragement of the women's group that Juana learned how to read. Reading was a facet of life in which the school system had systematically failed her because of its exclusion of indigenous curriculum and devaluing of indigenous children, leaving her monolingual in Kaqchikel and illiterate (Cojtí Cuxil, 1991; Maxwell, 2009). Only through the women's group did she learn to read.

Juana's reading ability encouraged her to engage with state structures. For example, she read the letters her children brought home from school. "Antes man xikowin ta xintzu' achike nib'ij, entonces majun ta xinb'än chike. Wakamin sí, yokowin. K'o achike nik'atzin, yikowin ninb'än" [Before I could not see what they said, so I would not do anything with them. Now yes, I can. If something is needed, I can do it] (personal communication, July 1, 2016). Now she knows when to send school supplies, when she needs to sign a form, and when her child asks to go on a field trip. Juana also now asks for the documentation she needs from her local government office.

She is divorced from her first husband, but he owes her child payments. The government oversees the process, and she now regularly goes in to document that he has not paid anything.<sup>10</sup> She said, “Antes man xib’e ta. Majun ta achike ninb’ij chike. Man yikowin ta nintzikij ri wuj nikiya’ chiwe. Saber achike nib’i’ix” [Before I did not go. I did not have anything to say to them. I cannot read the paper they give to me. Who knows what it says] (personal communication, July 1, 2016). Juana now advocates for the child payments; women fighting to better care for their children is a fundamental aspect of feminist goals that center overall well-being of both individuals and communities (Mohanty, 2003).

Gaining the ability to read and write in Spanish, to speak publicly, and the resulting gain in self-confidence is a critical component of *comadre* work. As Naples noted, “Traditional academic practices falsely fragment social life and paid work from social reproduction, activism from mothering, and from community” (1992, p.446). But looking ethnographically at Kaqchikel women’s experiences, their work within the church is clearly connected to their increased participation in their children’s education and interactions with governmental offices. Women’s support of one another and development of skills that impact their lives across domains is *comadre* work.

### **Collective action: *Visitas***

Women also enacted *comadre* work through *visitas* or “visits.” *Visitas* support women physically and socio-emotionally, and they act as a social safety net. The group conducts visits once a week, unless an emergency necessitates more. During a typical visit, four to six women go to another woman’s house. Women request visits for a variety of reasons, including illness, a financial disaster, celebrating birthdays, to recommit themselves to the group, or to celebrate the birth of a child. Visits include prayer over the reason for the visit, socializing and sharing concerns, snacks, the collection, reading a Bible verse, and the presentation of gifts. Women effectively bring two offerings: a small cash offering for the church and a typically larger gift of goods for the woman hosting the visit. The women thus support the church, but they make space for diverting their resources to their collective good, a kind of open secret between the women’s group and the church leadership. María described their visits as such:

Xqatzu’ jun necesidad...majun ta nikitäj ak’ala’, majun ta rucafe, majun ta chik, entonces tiene que ser jun grupo ri’ nikimöl azúcar, nikimöl café, nikinaq’ jun tiempo, ixin, entonces si niqab’e to’ ka pa necesidad. (personal communication, July 5, 2016).

[We saw a need...there is nothing for the children to eat, there is no coffee, there is nothing left, so the group has to get together sugar, get coffee, get some time, corn, and then we go see about their need.]

Typically, the visiting women bring something appropriate to the occasion: birthday celebrations warrant birthday presents, household hunger warrants beans, coffee, and other staples, the birth of a child warrants a prepared meal. Once, just after a mudslide destroyed several women’s homes,

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<sup>10</sup> It is not unusual for child payment orders to be ignored. There are few means for enforcement.

the group brought things like plates, mugs, and pots to help women rebuild their homes and do the work that women do.

Juana articulated why she likes the visits:

K'o necesidad. K'o ta necesidad ri hermana. K'o yab'il. O yek'ajo' ri kichuq'a espiritual. Entonces ri viernes ri' e k'o taq hermanas yek'oje k'o ti necesidad, yek'oje chi ri' y riyoj k'a re si Dios nuya' qachuq'a, niqab'än horar pa kiwi'. Niqato' jub'a qi'. O k'o jun yab'il xapon pa ak'aslem, e k'o riye' chi yojkito'. Y si riyin mismo k'o necesidad, nikito' rik'in oración. Ya ri' qab'anon k'a ri'. Yalan nik'atzin nato' chuqa awi'. Achiel como nana' k'a, xatapon chupan por jun momento cuesta naq'axaj, entonces nana' riyat majani' chik akuchi' yab'a wi', más yab'a kik'in riye nikib'än horar pan awi', chi yatkitito'. Ya yatkitito' k'a ri' porque ayonil ya man yakowin ta chik. Xak'ix apo jun debilidad chawe, man yakowin ta chik nato' awi'. (personal communication, June 26, 2016).

[There are needs. A woman in the group has a need. There is illness. They want spiritual strength. So on Friday, there are members that have needs, they are there, and if God wants, He gives us strength, and we pray for them. We help each other. Or if an illness came into your life, there are those that will help. Or if I have a need, they will help me with prayer. That is how we do it. It is very important to help yourself. Like if you feel that you arrived in a moment that is difficult to get through, you feel like there is nowhere to go, it is better to go with them so they can pray for you, so they can help you. They help you because on your own, you cannot do it. If you have a problem, you cannot get through it alone.]

For Juana, the women's group and their prayer visits were a key way to mediate the insecurities of their lives. She said "majun ta kan jani' ta niqab'än cha re, si jun ti rajil o jun ti oración niqab'ana' ka'' [we cannot really do a lot, maybe a little money or a little prayer we can do] (personal communication, June 26, 2016). Women actively addressed their structural marginalization through collecting food and goods for a household in crisis.

Paola, a 55-year old woman with five adult children who is separated from her husband because of his alcoholism, discussed how the women's group visits supported her overall well-being. Paola joined the group a year prior to her illness when her friend convinced her.<sup>11</sup> When she fell ill, she spent her savings on doctor's bills. With an ineffective public health system, Guatemala's indigenous poor, especially women, are financially depleted when illness hits (Chary et al., 2016; McIntyre et al., 2006). But the women's group helped Paola through her difficult situation. She said:

Xub'ij ri hermana María chiwe tab'ana' orar. Porque riyat yatel chupan ri asituación at k'o wi', xcha' chiwe. Porque como k'o jun tiempo fuerte cuesta xik'oje. Y man ninwil ta akuchi' yib'a wi' entonces riya xpe, xiruto' chupan ri oración. Xub'an orar pa nucuenta, y xub'ij chiwe achike rub'anik la oración nab'an kik'in taq hermano. Ya ke ri' xiruto'. (personal communication, July 4, 2016).

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<sup>11</sup> Paola had an abdominal hernia. While such a diagnosis is routine in the US, the lack of effective and affordable medical care in a language Paola is comfortable using delayed her diagnosis and treatment substantially, drawing out her suffering and eventual recovery.

[The sister María told me to pray. Because you can get out of the situation you are in, she told me. Because there was a time when things were really bad for me. And I could not find where to go, so she came, she helped me through prayer. She prayed for me, and she told me how to pray with people. And that helped me].

In addition to prayer, women divided up her household chores, helping with the laundry, cooking, and contributing foodstuffs. “Xkich’äj jub’a ri nutzyäq, xkib’än taq samäj pa jay. Ke re eqal eqal xik’achoj” [They washed some of my clothes, they did some work in the house. Like that, slowly, slowly I got better] (personal communication, July 4, 2016). The companionship, support, and relief from domestic work helped her feel physically better; discussing the problems motivated her to address her financial situation. The women’s group provided her with connections to get piecemeal work. “Ya toq xik’achoj k’o jujun taq hermana xinkayoj, xisamäj jub’a kik’in” [Then when I got better, there were some sisters (from church) that called me, and I went to work for them some] (personal communication, July 4, 2016). Such piecemeal work included washing clothes, producing handicrafts, and other domestic labor.

Cristina, a 45-year-old woman with five children and a recovering alcoholic spouse, highlighted how participating in the women’s group allowed her success in her financial life because of the resulting networking. She joined the church and the women’s group several years before when her mother joined. The group helped her when she and her husband were in financial catastrophe, owing more money than they had with no means of purchasing food to eat that same day. As she said “majun ta qarajil. Xojk’oje pa k’as. Man xojkowin ta xqatoj, y majun ta comida ninya’ chike ri ak’wala’. Majun ta, majun ta. Xa maq’än ya” [We had no money. We were in debt. We could not pay, and there was no food to give to the children. Nothing, nothing. Just hot water] (personal communication, July 10, 2016). When she told the group of their troubles, the women brought prepared dishes for the children to eat immediately and foodstuffs for the family until they found work. Using connections through the women’s group, Juana and her husband found piecemeal work, paid off their debt, and saved enough to open a corner store, which they now use to support their family. Participating in the women’s group facilitated Juana’s financial success. This, in turn, supports her overall well-being. She said “wakamin man ninmay ta chik. Weteman chi man oj k’o ta qayon” [Now I do not worry anymore. I know that we are not alone] (personal communication, July 10, 2016). Women’s work begins in domestic spaces but quickly spreads into other spheres, such as financial and business success.

Women’s *visitas* and the work they do is another way they embody *comadre* work. A foundational aspect of mothering is “[performing work] within the private sphere of the family or in face-to-face interaction with those in need” (Naples, 1992, p.449). Working directly with those in need is what the women’s group does. They visit members in need, but they also visit others in need to provide the same kind of material and social support. The group target elders and women in hard times, both as a means of caring for their community and as a means of attracting new members. “K’o ri yojb’a kik’in taq rijitaq, ri taq ixoqi’ man üt’ ta kiwäch” [We go to see elders, women who are not well], Juana told me. “Niqachajij ruma e k’o re majun ta kitz’u’un kik’in” [We care for them because sometimes no one does]. Their collective action to support each other and their community has wide-reaching implications for the well-being of their community as a whole and works to meet transnational feminist goals (Mohanty, 2003).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Kaqchikel women's *comadre* work through the evangelical church supports women and improves their lives in many ways, including learning Spanish, increasing literacy, and supporting women outside of church life. Understanding women's work in the church as *comadre* work recognizes, names, and analyzes that work and its wide-reaching, transformative implications. Analyzing women's *comadre* work highlights this group of marginalized women's collective agency in a context where they are often portrayed as victims of neoliberal globalization.

While women's work is transformative, women's participation in the church group serves to reproduce, strengthen, and grow an overall patriarchal institution, thus making indigenous women complicit in the patriarchal project (Riesebrodt & Chong, 1999). In the South Korean context, Chong notes that women enjoy the benefits of personal empowerment through the evangelical church, but that empowerment stops short of public challenge or critique of the overarching patriarchal nature of the church, thus ultimately reproducing patriarchal structures (2008: 172-176). The same is true in the context of Santa Catarina: women enjoy the benefits of personal and group empowerment, but they do not use that empowerment to challenge the overarching patriarchal nature of their church or other institutions around them.

Women in Santa Catarina advance women's causes including addressing poverty and gaining literacy as elaborated in this article. They built a supportive collective of women that assisted them in not only attaining skills but helped them survive and recover financial and medical catastrophes. As they report speaking up and taking power back within their families and in relationship to state actors in the schools and government, their ability to exercise their own agency suggests a new sense of their rights and abilities as indigenous women.

However, the approach women in this article take centers action rather than developing a feminist consciousness. Women do not organize to demand leadership positions within the church or an interpretation of scripture that recognizes them as men's equals. Instead, the women in the group keep women's concerns relegated to women's spaces, address women's needs themselves, and do not raise women's issues with the larger congregation. Women use only the resources they bring to each other, excluding any potential resources from the congregation at large. Women do not create platforms to address the systemic reasons for women's poverty and lack of education. This approach leaves the overarching systems that subordinate women intact and even serves to strengthen them. For example, women's work results in financial offerings from their meetings that support the church. When women in the group recruit new members, they grow the membership of an organization in which women are excluded from leadership positions and whose theoretical underpinnings place women as subordinate to men (Bloesch, 1982; Chong, 2008; Gallagher, 2003).

This article recognizes women's collective action despite its location in a patriarchal organization. This approach "offer(s) us an alternative model for fighting poverty that affirms and supports poor families instead of demeaning and humiliating them" (Orleck, 2005, p.6). This approach also recognizes the multiplicity of feminist practices that can and do exist within indigenous communities while recognizing that "Third World Women" are not "a homogenous, powerless group" (Mohanty, 2003: 23). Doing so respects the kinds of feminist work that indigenous Latin Americans do every day to make better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

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